

U.S. SENATOR BEN CARDIN



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The president and First Lady have tested positive for COVID-19. They join a growing list of more than 7.2 million Americans who also have contracted this novel coronavirus. We can only hope that their symptoms remain mild and they suffer few of the chronic health issues that so many “recovered” or long-haul patients have reported.

Their diagnosis should be a wake-up call for the entire country. COVID-19 is dangerous and needs to be taken seriously by all. This is not the time to let our guard down.

Currently, U.S. coronavirus hospitalizations have reached their highest levels since at least May in nine states: Arkansas, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming. The test positivity rate also has been rising in more than 20 states.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) still warns that those most at risk of serious complications from contracting the virus are older Americans, those with previous medical conditions, and racial and ethnic minorities. Nationally, the incidence rate has been trending among younger Americans. Similar trends are occurring in Maryland, too, with the majority of new cases under 35.

Coronavirus infections among college-aged young adults rose 55 percent between August and September as students across the country returned to campuses for the fall semester, according to a CDC report released last week. The most significant increases in infections among 18- to 22-year-olds occurred in the Northeast, where confirmed cases soared by 144 percent, and the Midwest, where cases jumped 123 percent. Increased testing alone could not explain the nationwide increase, the CDC said. Outbreaks linked to parties, bars, dormitories and other crowded venues are hazardous not only to the 20-somethings who are present, but to more vulnerable Americans with whom they are likely to come into contact.

Cases of COVID-19 also have tripled among people 18 and younger since May, according to another new CDC report. The report also found that the coronavirus cases among adolescents 12 to 17 years old was roughly twice the rate among younger children. The report found that while hospitalization and mortality rates were low overall, children and teens who were Hispanic, Black or had underlying conditions were more likely to be hospitalized or admitted to intensive care.

The bottom line: if you are young or otherwise healthy, you are still a risk to yourself and others, even if you are asymptomatic. If you are older, you are still at risk. If you eat inside a restaurant, you might be at greater risk. Listen to the health professionals. Follow available scientific guidance. Stay safe. Don't take unnecessary risks with your health or the health of those around you.

Taking COVID-19 seriously does not need to be complicated. CDC guidelines on public health prevention measures largely remain the same as they have been for months:

- Wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently. Hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol is recommended when soap and water is not readily available.

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Maintain at least 6 feet between yourself and others.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a mask when around others. Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces you and others touch frequently. *Don't forget about your phone!*

The ongoing risks to our communities remain significant; even as states like Maryland see COVID-19 numbers remain stable. This “first wave” has lasted longer than most people expected and continues to have a devastating toll on the budgets of our state and local governments that have been forced to take the lead on pandemic response when the federal government failed to enact any coordinated plans. In addition to the unexpected COVID-related expenses that they face in purchasing personal protective equipment, testing supplies, and additional technology to complete basic business, their revenue losses are drastic and threaten deep, lasting cuts to public safety, education, public health, and other critical essential services that our states, counties, and municipalities provide.

Congress has to respond. We just can't go home and say that this is not our problem. A lack of resources to pay for local police and fire departments is dangerous. Same as a lack of funds to provide our educators and school systems with the resources they need to safely educate our children. Local governments need to pay trash collectors and keep our roads safe. Governors, including Larry Hogan, have issued a bipartisan plea for more federal support to maintain critical missions of public safety, of public health, of education and, yes, to meet the direct needs related to COVID-19.

Congress also needs to respond if we are going to get our economy back on track. That is not going to happen if our state and local governments are laying off or furloughing workers.

The House of Representatives-passed the HEROES Act (2.0), which provides \$436 billion in immediate assistance for state and local government funding. Funds would be available to help communities of all sizes rather than just the largest jurisdictions within our State. In addition, this new funding is flexible and allows a state or local government to utilize the funds for revenue losses. I remain frustrated that the Senate Republican Leadership continues to block any kind of vote on this important bill so that we can provide our state and local governments with the urgent help they need.

It's now October. This year has been consumed with COVID-19 and its deadly effects. We are a long way from normal. But there is a path forward if we all work together and continue (or start to) take this pandemic seriously. I know we can do it and I thank you for doing your part and urging those around you to do the same.

Stay safe.



Ben Cardin

P.S. Maryland absentee ballots are starting to arrive in mailboxes. If you receive one, complete it and return it as soon as possible either through the U.S. Postal Service or drop it off at one of the many official drop boxes. Anything we can do to lessen the number of people who have to vote in person on November 3 will make it safer for all of us.

In Maryland, the deadline to register to vote or update your voter registration information is October 13. Although you also may register to vote in person on Election Day, November 3.